

**Date: December 13, 2020**

**Scripture: John 1:6-8; 19-28**

**Title: ADVANCE PEOPLE/MAN**

I wonder if you have ever given any thought to the extent of the preparations involved when the President of the United States makes a visit to a local community? A former agent with the FBI tells about some of those preparations. He says, “a team of Secret Service checks out every building along the route the president will travel, and every place he will be appearing. They go over each building with a fine toothcomb, from roof to basement, in their efforts to prepare for the president’s safety. We refer to people like this as ‘advance persons.’ They work invisibly behind the scenes, to make sure that everything is ready for the big event, that’s about to take place.” Advance people are very important to any well-known person, who moves from town to town.

Jesus had an advance man, who was in charge of preparing the way for Jesus’ coming. That advance man was, John the Baptist. John wasn’t hired by Jesus for this task. The prophet Isaiah assigned him to this task 400 years before.

The appearance of John the Baptist in the wilderness was the most important event in the life of Israel, for more than four hundred years. It had been that long, since Isaiah, a prophet of God, had lifted his voice to foretell of John’s coming.

You and I probably wouldn’t have been drawn to the preaching of John the Baptist. A man clothed in camel’s hair and wild animal’s skins and subsisting on a diet of locusts and wild honey, living out in the wilderness, wouldn’t seem to have much to say, about the way we live our lives. John’s appearance was eccentric. John’s preaching was morbid, all about sin and repentance, calling people snakes, and warning them of the wrath, that was to come. We like our sins treated more gently. In reality, we would prefer them not to be mentioned at all.

Dr. Fred Craddock says, “From his birth, John was set aside as a Nazirite. A Nazirite . . . was a person who was devoted to God and therefore lived away from society . . . A Nazirite; did not trim the his beard, did not cut his hair, and lived in an unusual way.”

Two things may surprise us, about John the Baptist. One is how popular John was. The other is his role in the drama of the first Christmas.

As to his popularity, Mark tells us that “the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River,” (Mark 1:5). That was quite an amazing response, to this wilderness preacher. Can you imagine every single person, in a large metropolitan area, and in all the surrounding countryside, repenting of their sins and being baptized in a river? Over the years, there have been many outstanding preachers, but none as effective as John the Baptist.

There was one fact, that set John the Baptist apart from all other preachers. Among those who came to John to be baptized, was a young carpenter, in fact a cousin of John the Baptist, named Jesus of Nazareth. But, we’re getting ahead of our story. Today, we want to know about John’s role in the first Christmas.

Luke begins his version of the Christmas story, not with Mary and Joseph, but with a couple named Zacharias and Elizabeth. Zacharias was a priest. He and Elizabeth were deeply religious people, who did their best, to keep all of God's commandments. Late in life, they were childless, much to their sorrow.

One day, while Zacharias was going about his priestly functions in the temple, he was startled by the appearance of an angel. It was our old friend Gabriel. Gabriel said, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias. Your prayers have been heard. Elizabeth your wife will bear you a son, and you are to call him John . . ."

Zacharias was nearly knocked off his feet. He asked, "How can I know that this is true? I am an old man myself and my wife is getting on in years . . ."

The angel answered, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to you and to tell you this good news." As a sign to Zacharias that this message was true, he was literally "struck speechless," which is how you or I would probably feel under similar circumstances.

When the new infant was born, there was much joy in the home of Zacharias and Elizabeth. On the eighth day, they took him to be circumcised. At this rite of circumcision, it was the custom to give the child its name. Family and friends thought that the infant boy would be named Zacharias, after his father. But Elizabeth spoke up and said, "Oh, no! His name is John."

They replied, "But none of your relations is called John." And they made signs to the poor mute Zacharias to see what name he wanted the child to have.

Zacharias beckoned for a writing tablet and wrote the words: "His name is John." At that moment, Zacharias' speech was restored, and his first words were to thank God. The neighbors were awe-struck, and news of these events spread throughout Judea. People asked, "What is this child's future going to be?" Luke says, "The Lord's blessing was plainly upon him."

It was six months after Gabriel had given the joyous news to Zacharias, that he would father a son, that Gabriel also appeared to a young woman in Nazareth, named Mary. Gabriel's message to Mary was, that she too, would bear a son, but not just any son. He would be the Son of the Most High God, and his name would be Jesus.

Mary was a cousin of Elizabeth. They very close, Mary spent three months of her pregnancy, living with Zacharias and Elizabeth. In fact, Elizabeth was the first person in the Scriptures, to declare, that Jesus is Lord. You'll find this story, in the first chapter of Luke.

As you're aware, we know very little about Jesus' childhood. But, in view of Mary and Elizabeth's close relationship, we can speculate, that young John and his six-month younger cousin Jesus, spent a great deal of time together! Perhaps they played together, and fished together, and did all the things young men like to do.

This might explain the kind of man, John the Baptist became! He was in contact with Jesus growing up. Believe me, cousins can influence each other growing up.

This might also explain, John the Baptist's reaction, when he saw Jesus come to be baptized? Matthew tells us, that John was reluctant to baptize his younger cousin.

John protested, and Jesus said, “I need you to baptize ME.” This says something special to me about Jesus’ character, as a youth and young adult.

**But, let’s consider the humility of John the Baptist.** John replied, “I baptize with water, but among you, stands one, you don’t know. He’s the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals, I am not worthy to untie.”

This says a lot about Jesus, if John was unfit to untie his sandals. But, it also says a lot about John. He was a man of great humility.

The Jewish historian (Joe Sea fuss) Josephus affirms that John the Baptist’s ministry was a stunning success. Untold numbers of people from all over the area came to be baptized by him in the river Jordan. Many of those who were baptized, became his disciples. They studied with John, and sought to follow John, just as others followed Jesus.

Two of Jesus’ most prominent disciples, Andrew and John, were originally followers of John the Baptist. You might remember, that one of the most gifted and influential preachers mentioned in the book of Acts, was a man named Apollos, who, according to Acts 18:25 was originally baptized, as a disciple of John.

New Testament scholar Don Juel once pointed out that, in this chapter, John the Baptist becomes the man who is not. When the priests and Levites ask him who he is, he replies that “he is not the light. He is not the Christ. He is not Elijah. He is not the final Prophet.” Then he adds, “He is not worthy to untie the true One’s sandals. He is not the one to baptize with the Holy Spirit.

Juel says, “John the Baptist had a kind of reverse résumé. Typically on a résumé, you list all the things that you are, all the things you have done and accomplished. But John had a résumé, that was like a photographic negative: before he could say who he was, and what he had come to do, he had to go on and on, to say who he was not, and what his work would not be about!”

In spite of his own popularity, John sought to direct attention not to himself, but to Jesus. That kind of humility is a rare commodity, even today. It was not his intent, to draw attention to himself. His greatest desire was to glorify Jesus.

The great composer and conductor Leonard Bernstein once said, that the hardest instrument to play is second fiddle. John willingly took on the part of second fiddle.

John was a humble man. **He was also a man of enormous courage.** The ending to John’s life was tragic, as you know. He offended the royal family of his day by confronting them with their sins and, for his efforts, he was beheaded. John the Baptist was a preacher of righteousness, and he would not betray his convictions. The world has always been made better by men and women of such character.

John the Baptist paid the ultimate price for his commitment to God. John was a man of humility and courage. **But, just as impressive, was his determination to bear witness to the light.**

John bore witness to the light, in his preaching. He bore witness in his life. On the banks of the Jordan he proclaimed that the Kingdom of God was at hand. When he

saw Jesus he declared, “Behold the Lamb of God . . .” He was the ultimate “advance man.” He prepared the way for the coming Messiah.

So, as you celebrate this Christmas season, as you think about the shepherds and the wise men, and the star, and Mary and Joseph, and all the rest of the important figures and events of that first Christmas, give a little thought to another small child born six months before Christ, to a deeply devout couple named Zacharias and Elizabeth. Their son was not the Messiah. He simply bore witness to the Messiah.

There was no star shining over the house where John lay, just a mute old man beaming down at him with pride and great joy. It was the joy of one who had lived to see the promises of God fulfilled. It was obvious at John’s birth, according to Luke, that the Lord’s blessing was upon John, and it was. John grew into a man of humility and courage, who proclaimed the coming of the Lord. Jesus himself composed John’s epitaph when he said on one occasion, “No greater man has ever been born than John” (Mt. 11:11).

That was John the Baptist, one of humility and courage. Plus, John had a commitment to bear witness, to the light of God. Let **us** bear witness to the light of God, Trusting, Believing, and having an Active Faith in God making disciples of Jesus Christ in the transformation of the world. Amen.